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GOVERNING THE SIKH EMPIRE: DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT
The Sikh Empire is often seen as a short-lived or weak state, but Punjabi documentary traditions suggest otherwise. Everyday documents like petitions, ledgers, court records, and revenue notes show that governance relied on negotiated agreements, obligations, and careful record-keeping. Instead of strict central control, authority was maintained through shared procedures and mutual expectations. Comparing these local practices to later colonial methods reveal that British record-keeping did more than just observe society; it changed it, making flexible relationships into fixed categories. Looking at the Sikh Empire through its own documents helps us see early modern South Asian governance as dynamic, resilient, and deeply connected to local customs. This perspective encourages us to move past colonial narratives and appreciate how indigenous institutions brought both stability and adaptability to the region's political life.

Keywords: *Sikh Empire, government documents,politics*

INTRODUCTION

Documentary practices in Punjab contest established historical narratives. Village *bahis* were maintained alongside district records, petitions circulated among administrative offices, and court files accompanied market notes. These documents connected individuals to obligations and linked administrative offices to communal expectations, thereby sustaining cooperation through continual renewal rather than through authoritative decree (Hasan, 2018, pp. 852–856; Sheikh, 2021, pp. 695–703). The persistent narrative of fragility is rooted in specific knowledge practices. Colonial administrators pursued legibility by classifying "custom," mapping land, and recording it in durable registers. Nationalist historians frequently interpreted the same archival materials as evidence of centralization and decline. However, both perspectives overlook the negotiated routines documented in vernacular records (Cohn, 1987, pp. 224–230; Chaudhry, 2018, pp. 759–766). An alternative interpretation aligns with the Indo-Persian secretarial tradition. *Munshīs* valued judgment, civility, and experimentation within constraints; they composed mirrors for ministers and codified practices that held both ethical and administrative significance (Kinra, 2010, pp. 532–540). Connected-histories scholarship demonstrates that these practices were mobile, as people, documents, and techniques circulated across Eurasia, with Punjab participating in this exchange (Subrahmanyam, 1997, pp. 736–739). This analysis is structured around three primary lenses. The first lens examines Mughal Punjab, where markets, courts, and district offices were interconnected through documentation that rendered social facts actionable. The second lens considers the Sikh "contractor state," characterized by a portfolio of contracts that distributed responsibility while maintaining appellate authority at the centre. The third lens addresses the colonial transition, during which investigative modalities such as settlement, canal engineering, census and recruitment handbooks, and identification regimes reclassified people and property, transforming flexible relationships into codified rule texts (Hasan, 2018, pp. 856–861; Gilmartin, 1994, pp. 1129–1135; Roy, 2013, pp. 1312–1316; Singha, 2013, pp. 289–292). The primary benefit is conceptual. Negotiated orders achieve stability when they are documented,

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subject to revision, and accessible to all relevant actors. Contract webs can expand without reliance on extensive salaried hierarchies. Furthermore, documentary revolutions fundamentally transform the environments they quantify (Hasan, 2018, pp. 861–866; Raman, 2018, pp. 976–983).

I. Mughal Punjab

Under the Mughals, Punjab's administration was legible and local. Orders, assessments, and petitions moved through multilingual offices; scribes, accountants, merchants, and litigants translated interests into actionable claims. Tracking the paper reveals dense interaction, not a simple duel between state and society (Hasan, 1991, pp. 352–356; Sheikh, 2021, pp. 699–708). Property served not only as an asset but also as a marker of honor, neighbourhood status, and caste prestige. Court records demonstrate that property transfers functioned as social performances in addition to economic transactions. The same legal instrument could either stabilize or disrupt social order, depending on the witnesses and reputations involved (Hasan, 2018, pp. 857–861). Written documentation did not replace performance; rather, it recorded and shaped these events. As a result, identical legal forms frequently produced divergent outcomes, and the archival record reveals a process of continual negotiation rather than a definitive administrative resolution (Hasan, 2018, pp. 862–866). This legal-moral economy relied on Indo-Persian secretarial culture. Munshīs maintained that exemplary ministers balanced decisiveness with flexibility, arbitration with empathy, and textual form with situational judgment. Their prose manuals and letters instructed officials in managing conflict, reconciling claims, and maintaining administrative workflow, an ethic evident in daily petitioning and accounting practices (Kinra, 2010, pp. 540–551). Markets were inside this order, not outside it. Anglo-Mughal disputes in Surat show a negotiated regime, with petitions, counter-petitions, and recalibrated customs rather than predation or a romanticized equilibrium (Hasan, 1991, pp. 354–360). Variation across Punjab was the norm. Hill *sanads* worked through tribute and alliance; plains assessments relied on closer measurement and supervision. Modularity, adjusting form to terrain and coalition partners, was the system's strength and echoed early modern patterns elsewhere (Subrahmanyam, 1997, pp. 739–744).

Narratives of decline frequently attribute over-extraction to the rotation of officeholders and brief tenures. Petitionary archives document villages attempting to secure longer commitments from transient jagirdars. However, these same records also reveal persistence, as local populations demonstrated proficiency in utilizing the system by drafting petitions, referencing precedents, and negotiating in court (Hasan, 1991, pp. 356–360; Hasan, 2018, pp. 865–866).

II. The Sikh "Contractor State"

Ranjit Singh did not take over a failing system. Instead, he rebuilt authority by making agreements. Kardars and commanders had clear financial and administrative roles, and the darbar changed their duties based on how well they performed. The central government stayed in charge by making final decisions on appeals and giving out rewards. Local officials got fixed shares and followed written rules to resolve complaints (Dhavan, 2013, pp. 743–745; Kinra, 2010, pp. 552–556). The army worked in a similar way. European drills and gunnery were used when useful, but Punjabi cavalry traditions remained important for speed and impact. This was not disorder. It was a mix of different forces, each chosen for the terrain, costs, and threats. This combination made the army stronger and kept ties with mounted elites without high fixed costs (Dhavan, 2013, pp. 743–744).

The court's pluralism was genuine and well structured. People from various communities were involved in finance, diplomacy, and leadership, but main authority remained with the Sikh center through a "contract ladder" that managed important cases. In the 1830s,

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appeals about land and capital became even more centralized in Lahore. This shift was not meant to take away local authority, but to connect it to common procedures (Kinra, 2010, pp. 556–559).

Ranjit Singh's administration found a balance between local independence and central control. Kardars were both responsible and accountable: fixed shares encouraged them, and written rules made revenue collection and resolving disputes straightforward. Officials were selected and promoted based on their skills and achievements, not just loyalty or family connections. The darbar could move or remove officers who did not do well, showing that authority was based on results, not privilege. This way of working also influenced the military. By using both European artillery and infantry methods along with local cavalry traditions, the army stayed flexible and ready to respond. Mixing different types of forces was a strategic decision that helped the government deal with threats like Afghan horsemen and maintain order at home.

Ranjit Singh's court practiced real administrative pluralism. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs all held key roles, especially in finance and diplomacy, showing Punjab's diverse society. However, the "contract ladder" system ensured that final authority remained with Sikh leaders. This setup linked local powers to a larger bureaucracy, reducing the risk of division and encouraging different groups to participate. By the 1830s, as Lahore gained more control over appeals and major disputes, the government worked to standardize its rules while keeping local identities and rights. This approach helped Ranjit Singh's state remain stable, flexible, and open to everyone as it developed.

This state is neither a Weberian bureaucracy nor a loose feudal patchwork. Instead, it functions as a ***contractor state*****:** *a networked polity where the sovereign manages delegated roles with defined duties and revocable privileges*. This structure reduces fixed costs, expands reach, and fosters community engagement by combining participation with oversight (Kinra, 2010, pp. 551–556; Hasan, 2018, pp. 865–866). Risks were apparent. Succession crises threatened stability if rivals failed to maintain the authority needed to renew, reward, and punish. However, fragility during transitions does not indicate inherent instability. Instead, it reflects a governance equilibrium based on regular renewal and performance-based trust. The system persisted because it offered valuable benefits, such as revenue shares, legal recourse, military honor, and social standing (Dhavan, 2013, pp. 744–745). The Sikh order appears original when we stop measuring it solely by centralization. It traded big bureaucracies for contractual responsibility. It borrowed pragmatically, kept what worked, and governed a complex frontier with limited cash and many brokers (Dhavan, 2013, pp. 743–745; Kinra, 2010, pp. 552–559).

III. Colonial Transition

Following annexation, British authorities transformed governance through systematic investigative methods. Settlement officers, canal engineers, census compilers, recruiting handbooks, and identity documents did more than collect data; they restructured society by converting flexible social relations into fixed categories and standardized proofs (Cohn, 1987, pp. 224–233; Chaudhry, 2018, pp. 763–770). Land settlement played a central role in this transformation. Officials defined rights, mapped fields, and recorded them in registers requiring regular updates. This "rule by records" established a continuous point of contact between villagers and the state. Claims were now adjudicated through measurement, attestations, and cross-checks, rather than relying solely on oral negotiation (Chaudhry, 2018, pp. 770–776; Hasan, 2018, pp. 859–862). However, this stability entailed significant costs. Customs that were previously adaptable became legal titles, and disputes shifted from the chauk to the settlement office and courts, privileging those familiar with the new documentation system (Hasan, 2018, pp. 861–866).

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The creation of canal colonies expanded the existing regime of record-keeping and water management. Engineers emphasized measurement, prediction, and maximizing returns, while civil administrators prioritized maintaining order and discipline. In the Indus basin, the convergence of the "science of nature" and the "science of empire" occasionally generated conflict, resulting in the construction of extensive infrastructure, the emergence of new agrarian hierarchies, and persistent disputes over water allocation, rights-of-way, and assessment (Gilmartin, 1994, pp. 1133–1143). These developments produced enduring changes in both landscape and society, marked by settled plots, planned cash crops, and a new rhythm of oversight, all meticulously documented in maps, registers, and rules (Gilmartin, 1994, pp. 1137–1144).

Recruitment policy fundamentally altered the classification of populations. The "martial races" doctrine, developed after 1857 in response to administrative anxieties and the desire for more manageable governance, concentrated enlistment on specific districts and communities, justifying selections based on climate, caste, and perceived loyalty. Although wartime exigencies occasionally challenged this framework, the doctrine largely persisted (Roy, 2013, pp. 1312–1321; Omissi, 1991, pp. 2–6). While the policy supplied both manpower and political advantages, it also entrenched social identities and exclusions more rigidly than before (Constable, 2001, pp. 439–445; Liebau, 2017, secs. 1–2).

Identification regimes finalized this transformation. Passes, passports, and surveillance mechanisms linked mobility directly to documentation. Movement became regulated through paperwork and policing, fundamentally altering livelihoods in a region historically dependent on seasonal labor, caravan trade, and military migration (Singha, 2013, pp. 294–301; Singha, 2000, pp. 151–158). The archive of identification reveals a colonial approach that was simultaneously developmental and disciplinary, integrating populations into new infrastructures while classifying and restricting them through standardized proofs (Singha, 2013, pp. 302–309).

The documentary revolution extended beyond rendering society legible; it actively reshaped social structures by formalizing certain relationships, promoting others, and mandating that individuals become registered proprietors, classified soldiers, or documented travelers (Chaudhry, 2018, pp. 776–783; Gilmartin, 1994, pp. 1144–1149). Although older negotiated orders persisted, their significance shifted: contracts were transformed into titles, custom was codified as rule text, and personal reputation was supplanted by standardized proof. Processes of renewal transitioned from relational to procedural and file-driven mechanisms (Hasan, 2018, pp. 861–866).

This transformation was not just administrative but deeply social, affecting daily lives and identities across Punjab and beyond. Through land settlements, the British introduced new documentation systems and redefined property itself. Previously, landholding was governed by local custom and collective memory, with claims and boundaries often adjusted through community negotiation. Survey maps and registers made these flexible arrangements rigid, tying rights and obligations to written records that could be checked, challenged, and enforced in court. This shift empowered those who could navigate the new bureaucracy, such as landlords, literate elites, and professional intermediaries, while marginalizing those reliant on tradition and oral agreements.

The canal colonies illustrate the British commitment to order through systematic measurement and planning. The extensive irrigation projects in Punjab represented not only engineering achievements but also deliberate efforts at social engineering. By distributing land in regular plots, selecting settlers from specific communities, and regulating water allocation through established rules, the British state sought to cultivate a disciplined and productive peasantry. The physical infrastructure of ditches and regulators was paralleled by an

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administrative infrastructure of paperwork, with each field, water share, and tenancy meticulously recorded and updated. This new oversight regime introduced both opportunities and constraints: farmers could appeal to official records to assert their rights, yet they also faced assessments and penalties for noncompliance with official standards.

Military recruitment intensified the process of social classification. The "martial races" doctrine functioned as more than a recruitment strategy; it restructured the relationships between entire communities and the state, as well as among communities themselves. By privileging specific castes, religions, and districts as particularly suited for military service—often justified through pseudo-scientific or ethnographic reasoning—the British solidified new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. These categories were reinforced through official handbooks, recruitment quotas, and even the design of uniforms and regimental traditions. Over time, what originated as administrative convenience became entrenched as social reality, shaping both aspirations and prejudices.

The identification regimes arguably produced the most pervasive changes. Passes, passports, and police registers systematically tracked individuals' movements, transforming mobility into a privilege subject to official approval. For a society with longstanding traditions of seasonal migration, pastoralism, and mercantile travel, this represented a significant rupture. The new systems of surveillance and registration not only facilitated taxation and policing but also delineated boundaries of belonging and suspicion, entitlement and exclusion. Laborers, traders, and soldiers increasingly found their lives governed by the necessity of possessing and presenting appropriate documentation—a process that, while creating new opportunities, simultaneously restricted freedoms previously taken for granted.

British colonial governance in Punjab and comparable regions extended beyond mere law imposition or tax collection. It constituted a comprehensive project of social reconstitution, subjecting every major domain—land, water, military service, and mobility—to the logic of record-keeping and classification. This documentary revolution standardized and stabilized numerous aspects of daily life, yet it also generated new forms of inequality, exclusion, and dependence. The legacy of these transformations persists, evident not only in colonial administrative archives but also in the ongoing significance of documentation, registration, and official proof in contemporary South Asia.

CONCLUSION

The Punjabi archive documents the evolution of administrative practices. During Mughal rule, paperwork linked ethics with governance and connected courts to markets. Under the Sikhs, contracts unified local regions and enabled centralized authority. British administration used records to reclassify land, water, and people, turning adaptable practices into fixed categories (Kinra, 2010, pp. 559–561; Hasan, 2018, pp. 865–866). This analysis makes three main points. First, negotiated orders become stable when they are written down, open to change, and known by many. Second, contract networks help manage cash flow and control by spreading out tasks but keeping a central authority for appeals. Third, changes in documentation reshape the social worlds they measure, showing that how we handle knowledge is also a way of governing (Subrahmanyam, 1997, pp. 739–744; Gilmartin, 1994, pp. 1144–1149; Chaudhry, 2018, pp. 780–783). From this perspective, the Sikh Empire should not be seen simply as a result of the Mughal decline. Instead, it offered its own answer to the challenge of ruling a large and diverse region with limited resources and many intermediaries. The colonial state did not just uncover Punjabi society; it changed it by making permanent the relationships that had previously been flexible. Historians need to let the documents show what kinds of power were created and include those negotiated arrangements in the history of states (Kinra, 2010, pp. 559–561; Hasan, 2018, pp. 865–866).

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